Santa Clara County Historical
New Almaden Quicksilver Village
by Albert Johansson

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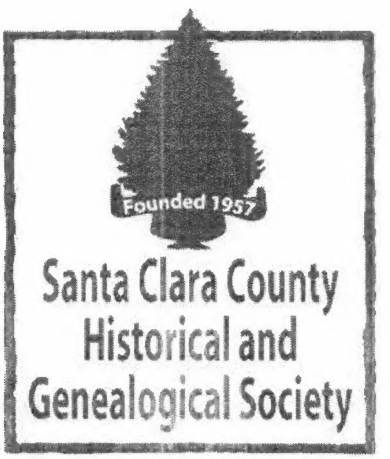
Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara Historical and Genealogical Society



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S-610

CLASS II - HISTORICAL

NEW ALMADEN QUICKSILVER VILLAGE

Probably the most interesting village in Santa Clara Valley from the historical and picturesque point of view. It stands now almost as it used to be in the boom days of the quicksilver industry, except that most of the old timers have gone away, their houses now used as week-end and vacation cottages.

New Almaden village and quicksilver mines are thirteen miles south of San Jose on the Almaden road, which branches from El Camino Real (U.S. 101) at the southern limits of the city. Road is paved all the way.

Main street is lined with little adobe and frame cottages left from the old mining days when the smelters of the mine occupied them. As you enter the village the Casa Grande, or Big House, is on the left (now a resort), the former home of the mine superintendent. At the other end of the street stands one of the oldest adobe stores and saloons in California, a spot where the miners bought their supplies and liquid refreshment. A little farther along is an old postoffice where a collection of articles from the mines is on view.

Above the city loom the reddish hills that are honeycombed with more than 100 miles of tunnels. On one of these hills the Mexican miners had their village which was called Spanish Town. The other miners were largely Cornish hard rock miners brought over from the mines of Cornwall.

CLASS II-HISTORICAL
NEW ALMADEN QUICKSILVER VILLAGE
(continued)

New Almaden was named after the ancient Almaden mine in Spain. The word "Almaden" is from the Arabic, "al", the and "maden", mine. The ancient Almaden mine in Spain has been worked for over 2000 years. Pliny remarked that this mine gave vermilion to the Greeks many years before Christ and later on was worked by the Romans for mercury.

The New Almaden ore deposits (cinnabar) were known to the Indians before the Spanish came to California. They used to rub the red ore, which they called "moketka", on their bodies for the glistening vermilion hue it gave them. The action of the mercury on their systems often caused salivation, making their teeth grow loose in their jaws.

In 1824 an old Indian told the Robles family and Luis Chabolla about the ore. Robles told Don Antonio Sunol. These men went to inspect the deposits, looking for silver and gold. They did not know what mercury ore was like, and so when they found no gold or silver they left the ore untouched. In 1825-6 the ore was used in painting the Mission Santa Clara.

A shrewd engineer, Andres Castillero, came to California from Mexico in 1845. While visiting at the Mission Santa Clara the fathers showed him some of the ore, which he immediately recognized as cinnabar. He knew that the Mexican government had offered a prize of $100,000 for the discovery of a rich mercury deposit so that they would

S-610
CLASS II-HISTORICAL
NEW ALMADEN QUICKSILVER VILLAGE
(continued)

not have to be dependent on the mother country (Spain) for this element.

Castillero immediately laid claim to the ore deposits which were on the rancho of Jose Reyes Berryessa. He got title from the alcalde, or justice, Antonio Maria Pico, on December 30, 1845.

Forming a partnership with the Mission Santa Clara, Castillero hired William G. Chard, from New York, to start work on the ore. Chard made makeshift retorts out of gun barrels, condensing the vapor given off, in water. In this way he got enough mercury to show that exploitation was commercially worthwhile. Afterwards, using six whaler's try-pots as retorts, he reduced 2000 pounds of mercury.

Later, part of the mine was sold to Baron, Forbes and Company of Tepic, Mexico, an English concern. Alexander Forbes came to the mine and brought men and necessary equipment to work it in November 1847. Retorts were used until 1850 when furnaces were installed to give a bigger output. The furnaces were 150 to 200 feet long with a series of condensing chambers. Brick smoke stacks from the old furnaces can still be seen on the hill above New Almaden.

For the first years of the 1860's the mine was tied up in the biggest legal battle that the State had known and which is still one of the biggest in California legal history. The mine was found to be so rich that it was

worth fighting for. Finally in 1863 the Quicksilver Mining Company bought it for $1,700,000. This company worked the mine until after the turn of the century. In 1865 the mine output was four million pounds of quicksilver, whichw as twice as large as the best yearly figure of the ancient Almaden mine.

Since the war the mine has not been worked because the price of quicksilver has been too low to make mining profitable. At the present time (1936) some of the old mine dumps are being worked over for the metal they still contain.

Miners, during the boom days of the mine, were held very much in check and found themselves bound to the mines. They were made to buy all their supplies, food, clothing, tobacco, and liquor, in the company store at higher prices than they would have paid in San Jose. In this way they were generally in debt to the company and could not leave. They also paid rent to the company for their living quarters. They were encouraged to frequent the bar in their off hours.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Hall's History of San Jose

CONSULTANTS: Tom Tonkin, San Jose, (Cornish miner at Almaden)